Statement

Making social protection, public services and infrastructure investments responsive to women and girls

Improving the status of women and girls is indisputably central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Women and girls continue to face a plethora of challenges including unemployment, limited representation in decision-making and inadequate access to social protection and quality public services.

Governments committed to integrating gender perspectives into policies and programmes for sustainable development; however, as highlighted in the 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action, progress remains uneven across and within countries. Acknowledgement of the importance of gender equality and women's social, economic, and political empowerment by States and non-State actors has not been matched by concrete policy implementation and demonstrable change on the ground (E/CN.6/2016/3). For instance, social protection systems in many countries are not set up in a way that accommodate the needs of women and girls or encourage transformation of gender relations in society toward equality and empowerment. Moreover, comprehensive and adequate health care through life — a prerequisite for achieving the health-related Sustainable Development Agendas and a human right for women and girls — is still not fulfilled for most women and girls across the world. Services attending to sexual and reproductive health notably maternal care and prevention of gender-based violence are still lacking. Public health insurance schemes do not cover all segments of the society, leaving women especially the poor and the most vulnerable, at the mercy of out-of-pocket health expenditures. Deficiencies in health care programmes intensify the burden on women, who usually shoulder the load of care giving responsibilities within their household.

Considerable evidence has shown that policies on gender equality and non-discrimination fail to address the issues of older women. Provision of economic security, protection and health care attending to the needs of older women is a big gap across regions. Worldwide, women outlive men. The gap in life expectancy between men and women was 4.3 years in 2000 and remained almost the same by 2016 (Global Health Observatory data, World Health Organization 2018). Given their longer life expectancy and prevailing gender norms, women often take caregiving roles for their family members and male partners in their old age. Moreover, evidence has shown that older women will most likely to experience poverty and serious health chronic diseases, such as dementia and mental illness, without any economic or healthcare support. In many countries, coverage of pension programmes and care is limited to older women, in others is completely lacking.

Social security schemes across the world, with few exceptions, conspire against women's equal access to social protection especially those working in the informal sector or assuming unpaid care giving responsibilities. The role social protection plays to end poverty (Goal 1), recognize unpaid care work (Goal 5) and achieve decent work (Goal 8) is clearly articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals. Across the world, the provision of care is not haphazard or random in families; women and girls are the primarily family members tasked with the responsibility of looking after the sick, children, the elderly, or the disabled within their households. The neglect of the value of the unpaid care in social protection systems continue to persist where it is treated as cost-free resources that bridge the gaps when public services are not affordable, obtainable or reachable. Social protection policy needs to recognize, decrease and redistribute the unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work on women and girls.

Access to public services is another huge challenge that may jeopardize realization of the Sustainable Development Goals. Considerable evidence has shown that unavailability of care providers, long travel distances to care facilities and inadequate transportation system hampers women and girls' ability to reach care services. Mental health services remain exceptionally limited and is of particular concern in conflict settings, as insecurity and violence can seriously increase prevalence of depression, anxicty and post-traumatic stress.

Considerable evidence has shown that, war and conflicts impact on women and girls wellbeing and livelihood; as many of them lack access to physical security, safe water and sanitation especially within Internally Displacement People and refugee camps. In conflict settings, the absence of rule of law and lack of protections schemes and needed infrastructures expose women and girls to sexual violence and exploitation as they endeavour to access locations of care or livelihoods. In addition, the time women and girls spend on fetching and processing water and collecting firewood comprise the effective use of their time on education or livelihood activity.

Last and not least, normative, legal and policies frameworks of many countries fail to address barriers that restrict women and girl's enjoyment of their rights in social protection and services adequately. In many countries, maternity leave is not adequate for women to strike the balance between child's rearing and job's responsibilities and thus are insufficient incentive for women to join the labour force. The normative, legal and policies framework and institutional measures play crucial role in either supporting or undermining women's access to social protection, quality services and sustainable infrastructure. There are significant normative gaps pertaining to women's rights in protection systems across the world. Without a fundamental transformation in this status quo, reaching the Sustainable Development Goals will be hard to achieve. The entire 2030 Agenda must empower women and girls through gender-responsive implementation and robust mechanisms to hold all duty bearers to account (E/CN.6/2016/3).

Recommendations:

a) Strengthening normative, legal and policy frameworks: to safeguard the human rights of women and girls and ensure equitable and inclusive access to protection and public services. Harmonization of national laws and policy frameworks with the international treaties and standards is required to ensure gender justice, inclusion and fairness for all, especially the most vulnerable and excluded notably older women, women and girls care givers, women in the informal sector, women with disabilities, among others. Ensure that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls and their human rights are central in national strategies, tools and instruments for implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development; and mainstream gender perspectives in all policies and programmes, at all levels and by all government departments, to ensure gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda (E/CN.6/2016/3).

b) Adopt a life-cycle approach in addressing the gender specific needs of women and girls in social protection. As social exclusion accumulates over the life course of women and girls especially for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. A woman's care burden in her early years in life can have consequences on her educational opportunities and attainment, which in turn influence her career options and income potential, all of which would eventually lead to economic insecurity in old age.

c) Scale up investments in care infrastructure, safe and reliable transport to support women's mobility and access to public services, and support women's livelihoods activities. Gender responsive and affordable transportation systems, street lighting, clean water resource, adequate and separate sanitation facilitate women and girls' access to locations, places, products, health services and economic opportunities.

d) Increase investments in social care services to address the care deficit and the unequal share of unpaid care labour. Policy-makers must recognize care as a productive economic activity and acknowledge it as a right in terms of both provision and receipt. Care responsibilities have to be addressed outside the family sphere. Social protection and policy have to treat care tasks as jobs that must be rewarded and covered.

e) Protect women and girls in conflict zones through ensuring gender sensitive and responsive services and infrastructures such as energy, sanitation and clean water to promote their wellbeing, livelihood and minimize risks such as gender-based violence.